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ABSTRACT

It is important to reaffirm the teaching of recent United States history in secondary schools. Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn state: "If we think it important that they (17-year-old students of 1986) understand the three decades between the Second World War and their own sixth birthdays (in 1975), we cannot expect this instructional job to be done for them by the daily newspapers or the nightly news; we have to teach this period as the history that it now is." Unfortunately, there are several obstacles to teaching this period of history, including time constraints, student apathy for the subject, and limited help from textbooks. This ERIC Digest: (1) examines the coverage of 20th century U.S. history; (2) discusses the consequences of limited coverage for student learning; (3) provides ideas on improvement of teaching and learning 20th century U.S. history; and (4) lists ERIC resources dealing with all these facets of the topic. (DB)

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TEACHING THE 20th-CENTURY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

BY

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Teaching the 20th-Century History of the United States

by Vickie J. Schlene

It is important to reaffirm the teaching of recent United States history in secondary schools. Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn (1987, 84) state this well: "If we think it important that they [17-year-old students of 1986] understand the three decades between the Second World War and their own sixth birthdays [in 1975], we cannot expect this instructional job to be done for them by the daily newspapers or the nightly news; we have to *teach* this period as the history that it now is." Unfortunately, there are several obstacles to teaching this period of history, including time constraints, student apathy for the subject, and limited help from textbooks.

This ERIC Digest 1) examines the coverage of 20th-century United States history; 2) discusses the consequences of limited coverage for student learning; 3) provides ideas on improvement of teaching and learning 20th-century United States history; and 4) lists ERIC resources dealing with all these facets of the topic.

Coverage of 20th-Century History. Most students study U.S. history in the 8th and 11th grades. The study of U.S. history tends to remain at these grades in the reform reports, including the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools*, the recommendations of the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, and the findings of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, reported in *Charting a Course*.

The California Framework clearly divides United States history into two separate, yet linked courses. In the 8th grade, students study the Constitution to World War I, followed in the 11th grade with a continuation, focusing primarily on 20th-century United States history, following a required review of the previous course. One of the Bradley Commission's recommendations is that 8th-grade students study United States history through the Civil War and 11th-grade students continue the study of United States history after 1865. The National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools report, *Charting a Course*, suggests 8th-grade students study the United States, with a world view, and in the 11th grade, students concentrate on world and American history and geography since 1900.

These suggestions have been and will continue to be discussed and reviewed. However, the reality of most United States history classes today is that each begins with colonialization and continues, in some cases, all the way up to the Great Depression. The simple explanation for not covering the rest of 20th-century United States history is lack of time. The school year ends before the students can be exposed to several key events of the 20th century. Frequently, 8th- and 11th-grade United States history classes cover almost identical material. It is not surprising that students often find the study of history redundant, irrelevant, and boring.

Yet, another obstacle to adequate teaching of 20th-century United States history is the textbooks. More than other subjects, social studies textbooks influence the content of the course and the motivation of the students (Sewell 1987). The strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks tend to be the strengths and weaknesses of the course, and ultimately the students' knowledge of the subject.

An analysis of five of the 1991 high school United States history textbooks and five new 8th-grade United States history texts revealed weaknesses in coverage of 20th-century U.S. history. Coverage in the 8th-grade texts varies between 3-4 units, an average of 248 pages out of 771 total pages. All of the textbooks cover the same information, in more or less the same glossy, 4-color, yet narratively lacking format. The five 11th-grade textbooks generally offer the same information, again in a riot of colors and numerous accessories, overwhelming the story. The 11th-grade textbooks present 20th-century U.S. history in an average of 368 pages out of 1049 total pages. Most of the 11th-grade texts attempt to include some type of in-depth coverage of one or two important events or people. These attempts are laudable and should be strengthened and expanded. Gagnon (1989, 130) argues for careful selection of content: "But because recent history in most textbooks is recounted so blandly, and in such bewildering detail, a clear focus on only three or four selected themes is all the more important." He argues there is simply too much history to cover every little detail and offers six topics around which to study 20th-century U.S. history. One of the Bradley Commission's recommendations for the middle and secondary schools, Pattern D, puts a two-year sequence together at the 10th and 11th grades. This allows the students a better opportunity to retain what they have learned in the previous year. This also alleviates the need to take precious time rehashing what students learned previously, leaving more time to reach and study the 20th century.

Consequences for Student Learning. The consequences for inadequate treatment of 20th-century United States history are appalling and have been reported in national assessments. Students said they had studied the U.S. history of the 20th-century, yet fewer than 40 percent of them knew the invasion of Normandy took place during World War II (Ravitch and Finn 1987). *The U.S. History Report Card* (1990) demonstrated that less than half of the 12th-grade students were able to associate Martin Luther King, Jr. with the Montgomery bus boycott. Students' lack of interest in the subject matter adds to that deficiency. Badly written and misguided textbooks exacerbate this situation. Many of our students do not know what side Germany fought for in World War II. Half of our high school graduates have little concept of the issues and events leading up to the Vietnam War. The Civil Rights movement is, for many students, little more than what they might have seen at the movies or on network television programs.

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Assessments have indicated that today's students are not familiar with events that have taken place in history since 1945. Many of our students have no idea of the substance and significance of the 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision, while personally experiencing busing and enforced desegregation. In *The U.S. History Report Card* (1988, 53), the NAEP reported that the students responding to the survey's questions displayed a particularly weak understanding of the 20th-century events that helped shape our country, as we know it today. Less than 30% of the students responded correctly to questions dealing with the temperance and suffrage movements, and to questions about World War I. A significant number of our students are not remembering the history they have studied; they are not integrating it into their repertoire of background knowledge (Gagnon 1989, 53). In other words, history is poorly learned.

The problem of lack of student knowledge of 20th-century United States history has been reported. Now is the time to start reversing this appalling trend.

Ideas on Improvement of Teaching and Learning. Even with the constraints on the amount of time to teach 20th-century United States history, there are examples of interesting lessons that involve and excite high school students. These exemplary lessons show that history is much more than a survey of names, dates, and other facts about past events. The lessons also teach how and why events happened, and trace their effects on subsequent events and developments. Furthermore, exemplary lessons teach that contemporary events have been shaped by actions of people in the past and that people today have the capacity to shape the future.

Obvious aids in the teaching of recent United States history are the mass media, including newspapers, radio, and television. But going beyond a merely passive view of the media is the important lesson for students. It is essential to teach students how to view and read critically, and not to accept thoughtlessly whatever is told to them. Teachers must exploit the television curriculum, or it will exploit them (Howard 1982). The wide variety of education-based cable channels greatly increases the opportunity to use television to teach 20th-century United States history. For example, two recent television programs suitable for high school history students were an in-depth biography of Robert Kennedy and the award-winning Civil Rights movement documentary, "Eyes on the Prize."

Teaching the use of primary sources is of critical importance. One type of primary source, newspapers, offers readily available reports of current events and provides data for student research projects. Copies of the front page of the *New York Times* the day World War II ended in Europe and the Pacific are easy to obtain and can be used to broaden the coverage of events. Having students write their own newspaper articles (emphasizing succinct, direct writing) describing key events, such as the first moon landing, involves them in actually gathering, interpreting, and synthesizing data. Videocassettes perhaps offer the best opportunity to capture students' attention about the recent past. One excellent example is "The Road to Brown," the story of racial segregation and the brilliant legal assault on it that launched the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Video camcorders can be used to record classroom reenactments of significant public issues cases, such as the Senate Watergate hearings.

Another 20th-century event of wide interest and concern is the Vietnamese conflict. Many lesson plans deal with teaching about the Vietnam War. In April, 1984, Jerold M. Starr announced the establishment of the Center for Social Studies Education, after trying, unsuccessfully, to find enough supplemental curriculum materials to teach a course on the Vietnam War. This eventually led to the publication of *The Lessons of the Vietnam War*.

Another way to capture students' attention is to teach history by utilizing one of their favorite pastimes—rock 'n roll music. Paul Hoffman describes, in the April, 1985 *OAH Magazine of History*, how he uses rock music as a primary source to teach history. He uses the common themes of 1950s music, e.g., school, cars, first love, and summertime, to tie together, for students, the post-war optimism. The 1960s protest songs reveal the historical significance of the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war sentiments. The controversy over rock lyrics of the 1980s can be utilized to discuss issues about limits to freedom of expression.

There are multiple resources from which to draw interesting and educational 20th-century U.S. history lessons. Emphasis on issues and ideas will help to enliven the history classroom.

Teaching 20th-century United States history effectively is a difficult task. Time constraints, flawed textbooks, and student apathy are a few of the obstacles. However, teachers can make history come alive by using television documentaries, news programs, and oral or written primary sources. By carefully selecting and synthesizing a variety of media, sources, and teaching strategies, teachers can meet the challenge of teaching 20th-century United States history to today's secondary school students.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are 703/440-1400 or 800/443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most larger public libraries or university libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below or ordered through Interlibrary Loan.

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